

# MAKING SENSE OF COVID-19 – LGBTIQ AND HIV COMMUNITIES

9 MARCH 2020

There is a lot of discussion about the illness COVID-19 and some of it is confusing. This fact sheet answers questions and shares tips and referrals for our communities.

## WHAT IS COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a novel (new) coronavirus. People with COVID-19 may not have symptoms but can still pass the virus on. Symptoms can range from a very mild illness to severe pneumonia. People with COVID-19 may experience fever and flu-like symptoms such as coughing, sore throat, fatigue and shortness of breath. Some people will recover quickly and easily, and others may get very sick very quickly.

## HOW WORRIED SHOULD I BE?

COVID-19 is a serious health issue but there is no need for panic. Australia has a strong health system and our public health officials are world-class. You can trust their advice. Taking a few simple steps and doing a little planning can help you look after yourself and others.

## HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF?

Washing your hands and being careful with coughing and sneezing is the best defence against most coronaviruses:



wash your hands frequently with soap and water (try to do this for 20 seconds) or alcohol-based hand sanitiser, before and after eating, after going to the toilet and after coughing or sneezing



avoid touching your face, particularly your nose, mouth and eyes



cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing (or cough and sneeze into the crook of your elbow) and dispose of tissues



if unwell, avoid contact with others (touching, kissing, hugging and other intimate contact) and check the latest official advice on seeing a doctor or self-quarantining.

You do not need to wear a face mask unless you develop symptoms of COVID-19.

## HOW IS COVID-19 TRANSMITTED?

COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through contact with droplets that contain a new coronavirus. This can happen through the air, for example, when someone coughs or sneeze, or through contact with surfaces that have the new coronavirus on them.

It can be helpful to visualise this. If a person has COVID-19, they might touch a surface and leave virus droplets on it. Another person touching that surface may then pick the droplets up on their hands and then touch their mouth, leading to infection.

This is why washing your hands is important, especially after touching surfaces and other people who might have COVID-19. It's also why it is recommended to avoid touching your face.

## WHERE SHOULD I GO FOR UP TO DATE INFORMATION?

The Australian Government is updating its advice on COVID-19 frequently. That advice is based on evidence and the best analysis from our public health officials. You can check out the website, subscribe to their Facebook page or follow them on Twitter:

- [www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov](http://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov)
- [www.facebook.com/healthgovau/](https://www.facebook.com/healthgovau/)
- [www.twitter.com/healthgovau/](https://www.twitter.com/healthgovau/)

The Department of Health has a Coronavirus hotline – 1800 020 080. Or you can speak to a nurse about any health issues by calling Health Direct on 1800 022 222. Both these services are free and operate 24/7.

If you or someone you know is travelling overseas or returning home, there is up-to-date advice on COVID-19 on the Australian Government's Smart Traveller website: <https://www.smarttraveller.gov.au/news-and-updates/coronavirus-COVID-19>

Please be careful with social media, online media and word-of-mouth. There is a lot of anxiety and misinformation at the moment. For those who are particularly worried, this can add to stress. Each of us has a role to play in being accurately informed and pointing our friends to trusted advice.

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## WHO IN OUR COMMUNITIES IS AT RISK?

Our communities are diverse and COVID-19 will affect people differently.

At present, the data tell us that COVID-19 is more serious for older people and those with a compromised immune system. This includes people with HIV who have a low CD4 count and people who have cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory disease, hypertension, asthma and diabetes.

There are concerns for people in residential aged care because they are elderly and can be in poor health and COVID-19 can be transmitted readily in group settings.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often experience poorer health outcomes and were more heavily impacted by the 2009 swine flu than other Australians. There are concerns they may be affected in a similar way again.

People with other health conditions may wish to take extra precautions to minimise their chances of getting COVID-19.

## IS THERE ANY ADVICE FOR PEOPLE WHO SMOKE?

There are some indications smokers may be more at risk of acquiring COVID-19 and early studies suggest smokers who get COVID-19 are a lot more likely to become ill. If you smoke and are considering stopping, now would be a good time.

## HOW DO WE LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER?

Some people may feel particularly vulnerable and worried about COVID-19. It's sensible to stay informed with the latest reliable news and important to seek support when you need it.

Whether you're living with HIV, LGBTIQ, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, from a migrant community, use drugs or are a sex worker – [there are organisations that can offer support](#) and people you can turn to for help. [Q-Life](#) offers phone and webchat support for LGBTIQ communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can also contact an Aboriginal medical service for additional information and support.

If you know people who are worried or in need of support, get in touch and ask what you can do to help. As communities we have a long proud history of looking out for each other. This is a good time for us to show the best of our communities.

Many of us remember the difficult early years of the HIV epidemic. Current discussions about COVID-19 can be unsettling for people who have HIV. Be sensitive with language and check in with those you know with HIV. People with HIV can get support through friends,

social media groups such as [The Institute of Many](#) (TIM) or through your local HIV organisation.

People who live alone or are socially isolated may need more support in the coming weeks and months. Similarly, people on low incomes or in casual employment may be more affected. If you are concerned about how you will support yourself, reach out to a community organisation.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IF I'M TAKING MEDICATIONS?

If you are taking medication, it's a good idea to make sure you have at least one month's supply. This is because you may need to stay at home if you feel unwell. Talk with your doctor if you need extra scripts.

If you are taking PrEP (for HIV prevention) and are concerned about maintaining your three-monthly doctor's appointments, talk to your doctor for more options.

## IS THERE A RISK PHARMACIES WILL RUN OUT OF MEDICATIONS?

Australia imports many medicines from India and China. As COVID-19 evolves there is a risk the supply of generic medicines in China is interrupted.

People with HIV should consider having an extra months' supply of HIV medication to accommodate a need to self-isolate, or delays in supply. This is also the case for people with other health conditions. The Therapeutic Goods Administration, the government body responsible for approving medicines in Australia, is working to ensure Australia's medicine supply.

There is no need to stockpile over the counter medication such as paracetamol or Ibuprofen. Only buy what you need.

## I AM TAKING ANTI-VIRAL MEDICATIONS – WILL THEY PROTECT ME FROM COVID-19?

Researchers are working to find an effective treatment or vaccine for COVID-19. There have been reports of a few HIV drugs being trialled as treatment for COVID-19. There is no reliably confirmed evidence at this stage that any HIV drugs are effective in treating COVID-19. Being on anti-viral medication for HIV (including PrEP), hepatitis C or hepatitis B, has not been shown to provide protection from COVID-19.

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## WHAT IF I'M CARING FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS A COMPROMISED IMMUNE SYSTEM?

If you don't have symptoms of COVID-19 but are still concerned about possibly transmitting COVID-19 to someone you care for, the precautions above will help.

If you're providing care for someone, it's important to take extra care with handwashing and infection precautions. If you have any symptoms, it is important to avoid contact with others while you are unwell.

For ongoing and up to date information please refer to the Australian Government Department of Health website here: <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>

## SHOULD I GET THE FLU VACCINE?

It's a very good idea to get the flu vaccine. This is even more the case as the number of people with COVID-19 grows. It will become available in Australia in April. Although the influenza virus and COVID-19 are very different from each other they can cause a similar illness, and it is good to avoid having both viruses together, or one after the other. The flu vaccine provides good protection against influenza and is recommended each year for all people living with HIV.

## SHOULD I STOCK UP ON GROCERIES AND HOUSEHOLD ITEMS?

If there is a large increase in the number of people with COVID-19 in the community, it will make sense to limit time in public areas such as shops. You will also need to stay at home if you develop symptoms. To prepare for this it is sensible to consider having more non-perishable food and supplies at home than usual. The current guidance is to have around two weeks' supply of basic food and household goods if possible.

It's important not to panic buy. Consider what you would really need if you had to stay home for two weeks and think about buying a few extra things over a number of visits to the shops.

This will be more difficult for people on low incomes. If you are a casual worker and concerned about losing wages, talk with your employer, workplace health and safety representative or union. If you receive NDIS, Aged Care Services or Centrelink payments, you can contact your provider for support.

## IF I GET INFECTED WITH COVID-19, CAN I GET IT AGAIN?

At the moment it isn't known whether people may be reinfected with COVID-19. There have been some newspaper reports of a very small number of people being reinfected, but these reports haven't yet been confirmed. It seems likely that most people who get COVID-19 will be immune from reinfection for some time.

## SHOULD I GO TO COMMUNITY EVENTS AND GATHERINGS?

Current advice suggests it is okay to attend events with large groups of others, though this may change. It is sensible to limit close contact with others at events. This includes limiting touching and shaking hands or hugging and washing your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitiser after contact with people or with surfaces.

However, if you are worried about COVID-19 because you are older or have a compromised immune system, you may wish to take extra precautions to lower your risk of contact with COVID-19.